Charlotte Mason’s 20 Principles

Session by Galadriel Miller

What is our philosophy of education? What is it based on? How do we view children? How do we view ourselves, our role as their authority, our role as their teacher? How do children learn? These are some of the questions it is important to answer before choosing a method and curriculum to use in providing an education for our children.

“Probably the chief source of weakness in our attempt to formulate a science of education is that we do not perceive that education is the outcome of philosophy. We deal with the issue and ignore the source. Hence our efforts lack continuity and definite aim. We are content to pick up a suggestion here, a practical hint there, without even troubling ourselves to consider what is that scheme of life of which such hints and suggestions are the output.”

~Charlotte Mason Vol 2: pg. 118

Who Was Charlotte Mason?

1842-1923

* A British educator (governess, school teacher, collegiate lecturer, author)
* Wrote *Home Education* in 1886
* PEU (PNEU: Parents National Education Union) formed in 1887
* The House of Education at Ambleside was established for training governesses and teachers in 1892
* Parents Union Schools (PUS) were established
* Other schools began asking to use the PNEU curriculum
* By 1905, five volumes on education had been published
* *Toward A Philosophy of Education* was published in 1923 after this method had been used for years by thousands of students.
* Having been thus evaluated, Charlotte Mason’s method was seen to be a highly effective and desirable method upon which to base the education of children. These results and her volumes eventually turned the tide of thinking in England, at the time, from favoring a utilitarian education to embracing the idea of a “liberal education for all”.

Charlotte’s “Short Synopsis” in 20 Principles

1. Children are born *persons*.

2. They are not born either good or bad but with possibilities for good and for evil

3. The principles of authority on the one hand, and of obedience on the other, are natural, necessary and fundamental; but--

4. These principles are limited by the respect due to the personality of children, which must not be encroached upon, whether by the direct use of fear or love, suggestion or influence, or by undue play upon any one natural desire.

5. Therefore we are limited to three educational instruments -- the atmosphere of environment, the discipline of habit, and the presentation of living ideas. The PNEU motto is: Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, and a life.

6. When we say that “*education is an atmosphere*,” we do not mean that a child should be isolated in what may be called a ‘child-environment’ especially adapted and prepared, but that we should take into account the educational value of his natural home atmosphere, both as regards persons and things, and should let him live freely among his proper conditions. It stultifies a child to bring down his world to the ‘child’s’ level.

7. By “*education is a discipline*,” we mean the discipline of habits, formed definitely and thoughtfully, whether habits of mind or body. Physiologists tell us of the adaptation of brain structures to habitual lines of thought, *i.e*., to our habits.

8. In saying that “*education is a life*,” the need of intellectual and moral as well as of physical sustenance is implied. The mind feeds on ideas, and therefore children should have a generous curriculum.

9. We hold that the child’s mind is no mere *sack* to hold ideas; but is rather, if the figure may be allowed, a spiritual *organism*, with an appetite for all knowledge. This is its proper diet, with which is it prepared to deal; and which it can digest and assimilate as the body does foodstuffs.

10. Such a doctrine as *e.g.* The Herbartian, that the mind is a receptacle, lays the stress of Education (the preparation of knowledge in enticing morsels duly ordered) upon the teacher. Children taught on this principle are in danger of receiving much teaching with little knowledge; and the teacher’s axiom is “What a child learns matters less than how he learns it.”

11. But we, believing that the normal child has powers of mind that fit him to deal with all knowledge proper to him, give him a full and generous curriculum; taking care only that all knowledge offered him is vital, that is, that facts are not presented without their informing ideas. Out of this conception comes our principle that--

12. “*Education is the Science of Relations*”; that is, that a child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts: so we train him upon physical exercises, nature lore, handicrafts, science and art, and upon *many living* books, for we know that our business is not to teach him all about anything, but to help him make valid as many as may be of -- “Those first-born affinities that fit our new existence to existing things.”

13. In developing a SYLLABUS for a normal child, of whatever social class, three points must be considered:

(a) He requires *much* knowledge, for the mind needs sufficient food as much as does the body

(b) The knowledge should be various, for sameness in mental diet does not create appetite (*i.e.* curiosity).

(c) Knowledge should be communicated in well-chosen language, because his attention responds naturally to what is conveyed in literary form.

14. As knowledge is not assimilated until it is reproduced, children should ‘tell back’ after a single reading or hearing: or should write on some part of what they have read.

15. A *single reading* is insisted on, because children naturally have great power of attention; but this force is dissipated by the re-reading of passages, and also, by questioning, summarizing, and the like.

Acting upon these and some other points in the behavior of mind, we find that *the educability of children is enormously greater than has hitherto been supposed,* and is but little dependent on such circumstances as heredity and environment.

Nor is the accuracy of this statement limited to clever children or to children of the educated classes: thousands of children in Elementary Schools respond freely to this method, which is based on the *behavior of mind.*

16. There are two guides to moral and intellectual self-management to offer to children, which we may call ‘the way of the will’ and ‘the way of reason.’

17. *The way of the will*: children should be taught (a) To distinguish between ‘I want’ and ‘I will.’ (b) That the way to will effectively is to turn our thoughts from that which we desire but do not will (c) That the best way to turn our thoughts is to think of or do some quite different thing, entertaining or interesting. (d) That after a little rest in this way, the will returns to its work with new vigour. (This adjunct of the will is familiar to us as *diversion*, whose office it is to ease us for a time from will effort, that we may ‘will’ again with added power. The use of suggestion as an aid to the will *is to be deprecated* as tending to stultify and stereotype character. It would seem that spontaneity is a condition of development, and that human nature needs the discipline of failure as well as of success.)

18. *The way of reason*: We teach children, too, not to ‘lean (too confidently) to their own understanding’ ; because the function of reason is to give logical demonstration (a) of mathematical truth, (b) of an initial idea, accepted by the will. In the former case, reason is, practically, an infallible guide, but in the latter, it is not always a safe one; for whether that idea be right or wrong, reason will confirm it by irrefragable proofs.

19. Therefore, children should be taught, as they become mature enough to understand such teaching, that the chief responsibility which rests on them *as persons* is the acceptance or rejection of ideas. To help them in this choice, we give them principles of conduct, and a wide range of the knowledge fitted to them. These principles should save children from some of the loose thinking and heedless action which cause most of us to live at a lower level than we need.

20. We allow no separation to grow up between the intellectual and ‘spiritual’ life of children, but teach them that the Divine Spirit has constant access to their spirits, and is their continual Helper in all the interests, duties, and joys of life.”

~Charlotte Mason, *A Philosophy of Education* (Vol 6),

“A Short Synopsis of the Educational Philosophy Advanced In This Volume”, pg xxix-xxxi